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TOPICAL FEATURED

## Site preparation work begins for Anaconda slag processing plant

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The future site of Premier Industries' slag processing plant is pictured here about 1.5 miles southwest of Highway 1, on the Mill Creek Highway near Anaconda. Site preparation began in June, according to the Anaconda Leader. Premier plans to use the site to turn slag into proppant, a material used in fracking oil and natural gas. In the background is the long-defunct Anaconda smelter stack.

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Provided, Mike Pentilla

The site of a new facility that owners hope will turn Anaconda slag into a material used for fracking oil and natural gas is starting to show signs of life.

Bob Kelly, a spokesperson for Premier Industries, the company that's spearheading the project, said general contractor Rick Tabish has begun site preparation on the location's 93 acres, located along Mill Creek Highway about 1.5 miles southwest of Highway 1.

Kelly said the facility will include a loading area at the site of a nearby slag pile, located about a mile from the plant. A private haul road will connect the plant to the loading area, he added, where dump trucks will fill up on the raw material. Similarly, the site will likely need fabrication and maintenance buildings, along with a parking lot and warehouse.

In April, Kelly said that the company would like to get one or two furnaces up and running initially, which he said would equate to about 50 or 60 jobs, and that the site is capable of supporting at least 10 furnaces.

As for a timeline, Kelly said Premier is still in the initial stages of the project and that it's too early to determine when the construction phase will begin.

However, the Missoula resident said Premier continues to move forward with a pilot program that's testing the company's process for turning slag into "proppant" — the fracking material — and pig iron, which Premier plans to sell to the steel industry.

To test to the slag- and pig iron-making process, Premier has partnered with Montana Tech professors Courtney Young and John Getty.

In an interview with The Montana Standard in 2016, Burt Todd, head of Tech's petroleum engineering department, explained how proppant is used to frack.

According to Todd, proppant is a rounded, hard material that can be injected with high-pressure fracking fluid to create fissures in underground rock. When the fluid bleeds off, the proppant is left behind and holds the cracks open so that natural gas and oil can reach the surface.

The industry is already using a ceramic-based proppant. But Kelly said Friday that one of the advantages of using slag is that its resulting proppant tends to be of higher density. Another advantage, Kelly said, is that the slag-based product will be made in the United States rather than overseas.

"(Premier) would be one of the few domestic providers of proppant," said the Missoula resident, noting that the plant has the potential to take "a huge portion of what has traditionally been considered waste and turn it into a product that can be utilized."

To evaluate how the process performs on a larger scale, Kelly said the company has contracted with a metallurgical firm in Wisconsin to perform the pilot program.

“(Premier is) relatively pleased with the results they’ve been getting,” said Kelly, adding that the company has submitted a patent application for the procedure.

After the pilot project is complete, Kelly said, the company will know more about what kind of emissions the plant will produce and will have the data it needs to apply for permits from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality. At that point, the company can also move forward with finding a manufacturer for its furnaces.

In an April interview with The Standard, Kelly said Premier hopes to initially get one or two furnaces up and running and that the site is capable of supporting at least 10.

Premier’s processing plant is a project several years in the making.

News on Premier broke in January 2016 when The Montana Standard reported that Tabish, who was then the company’s principal, sought to build the plant. Tabish later relinquished his role as Premier’s principal and became the general contractor on the project.

After a lengthy county commission meeting in December, Anaconda-Deer Lodge County granted a lease to Premier for the 93-acre site. At the time, commissioners reasoned that the county would be hard pressed to find a buyer for the land, which is located on a Superfund site, and that the jobs the company said could result from the facility were worth the terms of the lease.

The terms of the lease are for \$100 per month with an option to purchase the land for \$1. The company has to secure a building permit and begin construction by Dec. 31, 2018, before it can purchase the land. If these terms aren't met, Anaconda can terminate the lease.

As for jobs that might result from the plant, Kelly said Premier isn't taking applications yet. When the time comes, he said, the company will work with the Anaconda Job Service and host a job fair.

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Anne Pentilla